

Avengers return with new cast

Blending elements of the old series, "The New Avengers" returns to American TV with 13 new episodes.

Upholding the side of tradition, Patrick Macnee returns as the elegant Avenger-in-Chief John Steed, a little wiser and mellow with age, but ever the cool-headed, consummately skillful righter of wrongs.

By his side are two new accomplices in counter-espionage adventure: Gareth Hunt as rugged Mike Gambit, exmercenary-army major-racing driver, an expert in armed and unarmed combat; and Joanna Lumley as Purdey, a lithe former ballerina with extensive skills in the martial arts.

"The Avengers" has a venerable history dating back to 1960 in Britain. Originally Patrick Macnee was brought into a live cops-and-robbers show called "Police Surgeon" in a supporting role. Ian Hendry played the main character whose girlfriend had been gunned down in the street by thugs and who was subsequently driven by an "avenging" anger against all things evil. The title of the show was soon changed and for nine months, Macnee and Hendry operated together as the first "Avengers."

After Hendry left, Sydney Newman, now Special Advisor on Film Policy to Canada's Secretary of State and then, Executive Producer of the series, came up with the idea of a female sidekick for Steed. "But not an ordinary woman. Up to that time in such TV series, women were either wives or secretaries or sex objects, but not women who used their minds, made decisions, or took part in the action."

Honor Blackman became the first woman Avenger, Cathy Gale—an anthropologist, photographer, judo proficient and firearms expert. At Macnee's suggestion, she was dressed in black leather, a sensational touch that brought to the role a sly but unmistakable hint of kinky eroticism.

In 1965 "The Avengers" moved from videotape to film and began its highly successful journey into international television screens.

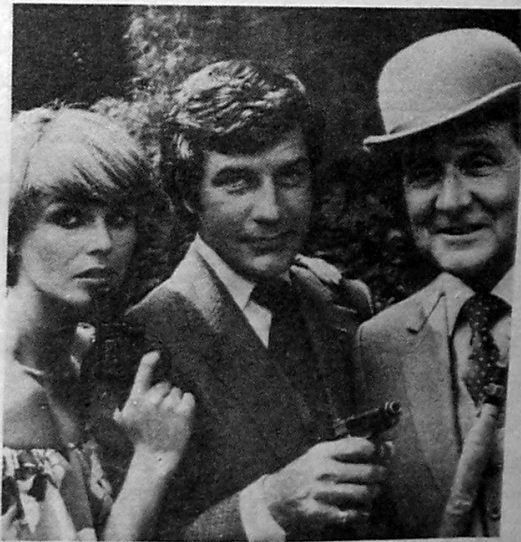
Steed had a new partner played by Diana Rigg—a wealthy widow with impeccable social connections and marvelous karate reflexes named Emma Peel. Steed and Emma made 53 episodes of the series together and brought its unique mix of tongue-in-cheek violence, sexuality and humour to a new pitch of effectiveness.

In the autumn of 1967 a Canadian actress, Linda Thorson replaced Diana Rigg and went on, as Tara King, to participate in the final 30 episodes of the program. For 12 years, the show's off-beat sophistication has continued to reach enthusiastic audiences in something like 100 countries around the world. Eighty-three episodes are showing in some American city every day of the week.

Six years after production had stopped, Patrick Macnee was approached to star in "The New Avengers" by the producers of the original series, Brian Clemens and Albert Fennell, along with Frenchman Rolf Roffi.

The first 13 episodes of the new series shown on British television last season garnered the Top Family Program award in an important newspaper poll, as well as the Favorite Actress award for newcomer Joanna Lumley.

Steed still uses his trick bowler hats and umbrella swordstick with deadly effect. The clothes, the furnishings, the accessories, the cars—Jaguars for the men, an MGB for Purdey—are as lavish as ever, but the show's locations have gone truly international, the action is faster than before, the stories more fantastic, the comedy even spoofter and the always highly choreographed, stylized violence is now virtually balletic in quality.



AVENGING AGAIN — Patrick MacNee (right) has returned as the dexterous John Steed on "The New Avengers." His femme fatale is Joanna Lumley, who portrays Purdey. A new part for the series introduces Gareth Hunter, who plays Mike Gambit

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America Beautiful public messages. His most recent motion pictures include "Graveyard" and "Return of a Man Called Horse."

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